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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001213

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C O R R E C T E D    C O P Y ((TXT CHANGE IN PARA(3)))

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/25/2017  
TAGS: PREL PTER MOPS KWBG IS  
SUBJECT: MOD DECLARES IDF HAS "FREEDOM OF ACTION" IN GAZA STRIP

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Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Sneh publicly announced April 25 that the IDF now has "freedom of action" in the Gaza Strip as a result of Hamas taking responsibility for firing rockets and mortars from Gaza April ¶24. He added that Israel is not interested in seeing an escalation in the Gaza Strip, but will conduct necessary anti-terrorist activities. Israeli MOD Chief of Staff Herzog told the Ambassador April 24 -- after a significant barrage of Qassam rockets and mortar fire from the Gaza Strip -- that the IDF views the cease-fire as over. PM Olmert is meeting with his security and defense chiefs this morning, but it appears that the Israeli response will likely be limited air strikes at this point. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In an early morning radio interview on April 25, Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh said that, as a result of the barrage of rockets, the IDF now has "freedom of action" in the Gaza Strip to carry out anti-terrorist activities. He clarified that this had not been the case as long as the Palestinians respected the cease-fire, saying, "There is no way that Israel will allow a situation in which the terrorists have freedom of action, and the IDF does not." Sneh also stressed that Israel does not seek an escalation of IDF activities in the Strip. Sneh added that because of the IDF's high degree of readiness, it foiled an attempt by terrorists April 24 -- on Israel's Independence Day -- to infiltrate green-line Israel from the Gaza Strip and kidnap an IDF soldier under the cover of Qassam rocket and mortar attacks. Israeli radio also reported on April 25 an interview in Gaza with Palestinian Authority (PA) spokesman Ghazi Hamed, who allegedly said that the April 24 Qassam rocket and mortar barrage was retaliation for the previous week's killings of Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Al-Aksa Martyrs Brigades members in the West Bank. Hamas said publicly that it fired 28 rockets and 61 mortar shells into Israel. We cannot confirm the numbers of rockets and mortar shells fired, but Herzog told the Ambassador the number of known impacts within Israel was an order of magnitude less.

¶3. (C) On April 24, around 0645 local time, multiple Qassam rocket launches and significant mortar fire from the Gaza Strip were observed. According to Israeli media reporting, the military wing of Hamas claimed credit for the barrage of 28 rockets and 61 mortar shells. In a discussion with Ambassador Jones shortly after the barrage, MOD Chief of Staff BGEN (Res.) Michael Herzog told the Ambassador that as far as the IDF is concerned, the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip

is over. He anticipated a formal GOI announcement to that effect, and argued that this latest round of Qassam rocket launches and mortar firings differed from previous "violations" of the ceasefire not only in scope, but also in terms of the open involvement of Hamas. Herzog's view was that the events of the previous weekend -- which he characterized as particularly deadly for the Palestinians -- had tipped the balance of opinion within Hamas toward those who believed the ceasefire was a mistake. Also on April 24, 10F Chief OF Stsff MGEN (Res.) Gabi Ashkenazi told USSC LTG Dayton to expect larger-than-normal IDF activity in the Gaza Strip in the next 48 hours.

¶4. (C) Israeli opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu told Israeli radio on April 25 that he had met the day before with PM Olmert. While not disclosing the subject of their conversation, Netanyahu said on the radio that a full closure should be imposed on the Gaza Strip -- excluding the supply of water, food and medication -- in order to halt the Qassam rocket fire and "oust" the Hamas-led PA government.

Netanyahu added that if such a measure proves ineffective, Israel should prepare for a broad-ranging military operation in the Gaza Strip. Within Olmert's security cabinet, several ministers (e.g., Rafi Eitan, Eli Yishai, Zeev Boim and Avigdor Lieberman) advocated re-occupation of the Philadelphia corridor between the Gaza Strip and Egypt in their comments to Israeli reporters on April 24. PM Olmert is scheduled to meet with defense chiefs on April 25 to discuss a response to the barrage of Qassam rockets and mortar shells fired the previous day.

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COMMENTS  
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¶5. (C) Israeli security services have been regularly conducting counterterrorist operations in the West Bank. On April 21, the GOI Press Office reported that two PIJ terrorists and a Tanzim terrorist were killed in a joint IDF and Border Police Force operation earlier in the day in

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Jenin. On April 22, the GOI Press Office reported that the IDF killed a PIJ terrorist, and a Tanzim terrorist during arrest operations in Nablus.

¶6. (C) Prior to the Memorial and Independence Day holidays, Israel imposed a general closure on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, per normal practice. On April 25, the GOI Press Office reported that the closure had been lifted.

¶7. (C) Earlier in the month, Israeli DefMin Peretz announced that the IDF's rules of engagement in the Gaza Strip had been revised, allowing the IDF to strike at Qassam rocket teams approaching the fence around the Gaza Strip in order to carry out rocket launches. Embassy Tel Aviv's assessment is that the DefMin's statement did not signify anything substantially new, as the IDF had already been carrying out limited strikes against launch teams and suspects approaching the fence surrounding the Gaza Strip.

¶8. (C) Barring any substantial surprise terrorist attack, Qassam hit on a civilian center causing deaths, or successful abductions of IDF soldiers, we anticipate that the GOI is likely to act only in a restrained manner against potential threats from the Gaza Strip, or to retaliate after the fact. Civilian contacts within the MOD over the last several months have stressed to emboffs and visitors that Israel has no desire to re-occupy the Gaza Strip and many question the potential gains from a new ground incursion into the Strip.

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